

A Characterization of Amarantha

Robert Malsberry

THE SPIRITUAL maturation of a young girl, ignorant of any real happiness in life, who is awakened to the beauty love can offer, is the theme of a beautifully narrated short story by Wilbur Daniel Steele. After one night's interlude, the entire course of the girl's life is altered. It is this tempestuous night that the reader glimpses in "How Beautiful With Shoes."

Any attempt to characterize the heroine, Amarantha, must first reveal her environment. One of the most backward sections in North Carolina is the setting, and the reader is made vividly aware of this typical "Tobacco Road" backdrop. Amarantha is a farm girl—used to farm life and used to handling animals. The simplification of her name to the harsh and ugly "Mare" fully illustrates the crudeness and coarseness she is exposed to from birth. The author emphasizes Amarantha's faulty speech traits, but the reader feels no contempt for her—only pity for her lack of a normal educational background. Along with the responsibility of performing many farm chores, Mare's deaf mother seems to add a greater burden on her. The reader resents these impositions upon the girl and understands her predicament. The girl finds herself attracted to rough and crude Ruby Herter, but actually she is not capable of loving him.

Mare is totally unprepared for her meeting with the madman, Humble Jewett, and the full meaning of their brief encounter remains muddled until after Jewett's death. Although the tragedy in Jewett's life is barely outlined, the reader's sympathy is actively aroused for the educated maniac. The madman frightens her, and the shock is too great—too sweeping—for her to evaluate the night's events until she is again safe in her home. The poetry that Humble dedicates to Amarantha falls upon unaccustomed ears—she does not understand the poems and is easily embarrassed. Like an art connoisseur trying to discuss a painting by Van Gogh with an ignorant pauper, Jewett talks a language she does not understand.

After Mare is again in her lean-to bedroom, the full significance of the night's events passes before her eyes. Last night she had moved beneath the trees, but only now is she stumbling over the

untrod paths. Only now does she begin to understand the meaning of the poetry the young man sang. Only now does she run through the moonlight with the man beside her. And then the awakening that the reader hopefully has been anticipating arrives—Amarantha utters the most meaningful sentence in the entire story, "Is it only crazy folks ever say such things?" She realizes that there is more to love besides Ruby's animal ways. The shoes she refuses to take off are symbols of her enlightenment. However, she remains troubled—incapable, for the moment, of accepting her newly discovered theories. In a terrible and fascinating moment she dismisses Ruby forever from her room. The author's omniscient point of view is able vividly to portray the various levels of human relations, and in the end the reader lauds Amarantha for her spiritual awakening.

About "An Apology for Idlers"

Barbara J. Fisher

I AM IN complete agreement with Robert Louis Stevenson in his essay *An Apology for Idlers*. However, I cannot help wishing he were here today, so that he could tell me how to accomplish the nearly insurmountable task of being a successful idler. Granted, one can be a successful idler today if one is a recluse, but being of the social nature, I can think of nothing worse than isolating myself from this society no matter how hectic it may be. Therefore, I have a stone wall in front of me, since the task of existing in today's society is a full-time occupation and leaves little room for the glorious freedom of idleness. Surely Mr. Stevenson would have to modify his plan a bit for the world of here and now.

I can think of any number of times I have managed a little philosophical thinking and luxurious idleness in this speeding world. Of course I had to do it while standing on a subway, while standing on a street corner or while being jostled on a bus stuffed with people. Nevertheless I do consider it idleness, because I derived much pleasure from those minutes. As an example one evening I came off a bus in front of a white building, just in time to hear, "Times, pay-pah!" being called in a thin, childish voice. Immediately I forgot I was in a hurry and searched for the voice. In front of the white building stood a little colored boy, so little he looked like a doll. All I could see was his wooly head above the big paper he clutched in front of him. Again he called his wares in his reed-like voice, but as I watched him I realized he would not appreciate my solicitude for his size and age. He was a straight sprout and one could see that he was